

Transforming Individuals and Organizations



Three Simple Steps to Everyday Acts of Greatness

by Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

The Scene. Early morning commuter plane filled with 70% corporate types and 30% vacationers. A regular route I've flown many times for a major Chicago area client company. I take my spot a couple of rows back from the front in a single seat on one side of the aisle and

contemplate the small amount of foot space available under the seat in front of me within which I need to store my briefcase and size 8 1/2 feet. Hmm.

I hear a male voice call out from the right of me, "Hello, sir. I didn't know you were

taking this flight." I glance up and see a suited guy in the aisle greeting a man seated in one of the two seats on the other side of my row.

Acknowledgements made, he moves to the back of the plane. Other folks file past. Finally, the flow of passengers trickles down and then dies. We're all seated and anxious to depart.

I settle back in my seat and pull a folder of work out of the back-of-the seat pocket, ready to tune out the usual pre-flight announcements. "Excuse me," says a voice from the aisle. I look up. The young male flight attendant is standing there, gesturing. "I need three people from within these four rows to volunteer to move to the back of the plane. We must re-distribute some weight before takeoff since we don't have a full flight." He looks around at the twelve of us who are seated near the front, trying to catch eyes. "I need three volunteers," he repeats.

Please Let this Cup Pass Before Me. Now, let me just say, normally I would likely be a first responder to this appeal. Raised with solid Midwestern values as the third child of four in my sibling group, I've been well schooled in sacrificing for others and doing the right thing. But the bargaining in my head begins immediately. "I've got a meeting

almost as soon as we are scheduled to land. I've got to get off the plane right away and get to my client site. Can't afford the extra 10 minutes to disembark from the back of the plane," says my internal excuse-maker. "Not me, not this time." Meanwhile, the flight attendant is still standing there, scanning the four rows and periodically repeating: "I need

three volunteers.

We cannot take off until this happens."

More time passes.

No volunteers.

And no one meeting the eyes of the flight attendant, including me.

Then I sense movement to my right. I look over and see the guy who had been greeted as "sir" a while back gathering his things. As he grabs his briefcase and newspaper, our eyes happen to catch for a split second. I feel a jolt from the non-verbal exchange, an internal shift that prompts me to begin grabbing my stuff, too. Soon, a third passenger follows. We all get re-settled in the back of the plane and the pre-flight announcements begin.

So What's the Big Deal? A pretty mundane sequence of events, right? Entirely forgettable. Except for one thing - that guy, "sir." He moved me. Literally and figuratively. Without a word exchanged, I had followed him. My great excuses crumbled in the face of his personal example and the split-

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second communication that passed between us.

What a great act of leadership!

Everyday Acts of Greatness.

There's a name for this kind of leadership. *Emergent leadership*. I didn't coin the term but I've become a big fan of it over the years. It's one of my favorite concepts to introduce early in a semester of leadership classes as a way to challenge students' thinking about leadership right off the bat.

The greater good, even. That man on the plane didn't gain influence with me over time. He did it through the power of a single moment.

We see and even provide examples of this kind of leadership all the time but most of us aren't attuned to noticing it. The woman in the meeting who dares to slow down group decision-making by speaking a truth that others in the room have been avoiding, turning the discussion in an entirely new direction. The kid who picks up the soccer ball at recess and heads to the open square of

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Many of us think of leadership as belonging to those who are invested with it through their assigned positions (e.g. a CEO, a captain of a jetliner). In contrast, "emergent leadership" typically describes the type of leadership that emerges over time when a team member or individual gradually becomes the most influential person in that human system, regardless of his/her assigned leadership role. But I think that's too limited a definition.

From my perspective, an additional meaning of the term, and the one I get most jazzed about, is the kind of leadership I saw on that plane. Emergent leadership is also about everyday acts of greatness - a split second act of influence that moves others to follow in ways that serve a meaningful goal.

grass, other kids following. Or more significantly, think of Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of a segregated bus...and changing history.

Active Cultivation.

My most recent brush with this kind of leadership causes me to ask: What sort of power could be unleashed if we each actively *cultivated* it? Arguably, there are only so many assigned leadership roles available in the world. The number of emergent leadership roles available, however, is infinite.

I've done a bit of thinking about how we can prepare ourselves for these kinds of opportunities when they present themselves. Here are the steps that make sense to me:

1. Anchoring. Emergent leadership acts are often triggered by situations that provoke our core values and beliefs. That guy on the plane didn't know he'd end up being in a pool of people asked to move to the back of plane. None of us did. But something about that situation triggered a core value or belief for him, which prompted him to act.

Let's have some fun with that for a minute. What caused him to act? He may have a core value around self-sacrifice or responsiveness that caused him to step forward first. Or he may have a core belief that "decent people step forward when asked for help." Or like many busy business people I work with, he may have a belief that "time is precious" and realized we would waste more of it by no one volunteering than it would take to disembark from the back of the plane.

So what core values and beliefs should you be prepared to act on in future emergent leadership-type situations? Some folks walk around with a clear sense of their core values and beliefs. If you are one of those folks, skip to step #2. If you aren't, some excavation may be in order.

One way to answer this question is to take a retrospective view. Think about your last week. Can you identify any situations in which you acted as an emergent leader? (Note: this is an easy question to dismiss by only doing a superficial scan of your past week, so

challenge yourself to sit with it a while and do a more thorough scan.) If so, what value or belief was active or even at stake for you that caused you to act in that situation? If there were multiple situations, do any patterns of value or belief emerge as those you want to be prepared to act on in the future?

Another angle on this step is to reflect over past feedback you've received from others about leadership you provided in unexpected ways - or go ask for it now from some trusted others. (Note: if you ask others,

they won't necessarily relate to the "emergent leadership" label so unless you are looking to educate them, just ask them to describe any moments in which they recall you stepping

forward to lead informally.) In

what sorts of situations did those emergent leadership acts occur? What was at stake that compelled you to act? And why did what was at stake matter to you?

One last tip here: if you find it difficult to neatly categorize your values or beliefs, lists of both exist out in the world. (Really. I just googled it to make sure.) So go look at a list and see which offerings speak most deeply to you.

By anchoring ourselves in our core values and beliefs, we not only benefit our lives in myriad ways that go beyond the purposes of this single article but we also prepare ourselves to act as emergent leaders.

What core values and beliefs should you be prepared to act on?

2. Commitment. Make a commitment to emergent leadership. Reflect on the concept. Become a student of it. Read articles on the topic if you want more intellectual grounding in it. Or if you are more of an experiential learner, watch the dynamics within your work place, family or even casual encounters. You'll marvel at the small acts of emergent leadership that you begin noticing and the impact they have. Make it a game to count the number of emergent leadership acts you either observe or create every day. Maybe even internalize a value around emergent leadership or the belief that it has great power (see step # 1).

3. Attunement. Once you have anchored yourself in your core values and set your commitment, the opportunities to act as an emergent leader will present themselves. I guarantee it. How do I know this? Because I spend hours every work day exploring different clients' stories about unexpected ways in which they (or someone else in their organization) provided leadership in a situation without being the assigned leader in the conversation, in the group or on the project. And in my own life, I see that same

truth play out on a daily basis. Not just on airplanes.

The goal here is about paying attention so that you spot the opportunities when they show up, dropping down into your value and belief base to guide you, and then *act*. The kind of everyday emergent leadership situations I am writing about are "here and gone" in a flash.

Closing Thoughts.

I hope you are enjoying [this series](#) on my random daily encounters with leadership topics. I am constantly amazed by the richness of life, the forces at play, and the questions they raise.

Emergent leadership is a concept whose time has come and I hope you'll join me in cultivating it in your life. What opportunities for everyday acts of greatness lie in front of you today?

I'm even considering getting t-shirts printed for those of us who are making this commitment. Let me know if you want one.



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